

Kings Square Fremantle

A central public square for the people or a site for a grand City Administration Building?



Role of public squares

Most small well-established cities have a prominent central place which identifies their unique character.

For visitors, these places offer a quick uptake of the cultural and societal values of the people living in the city and for residents, they provide a venue for gathering and connection.

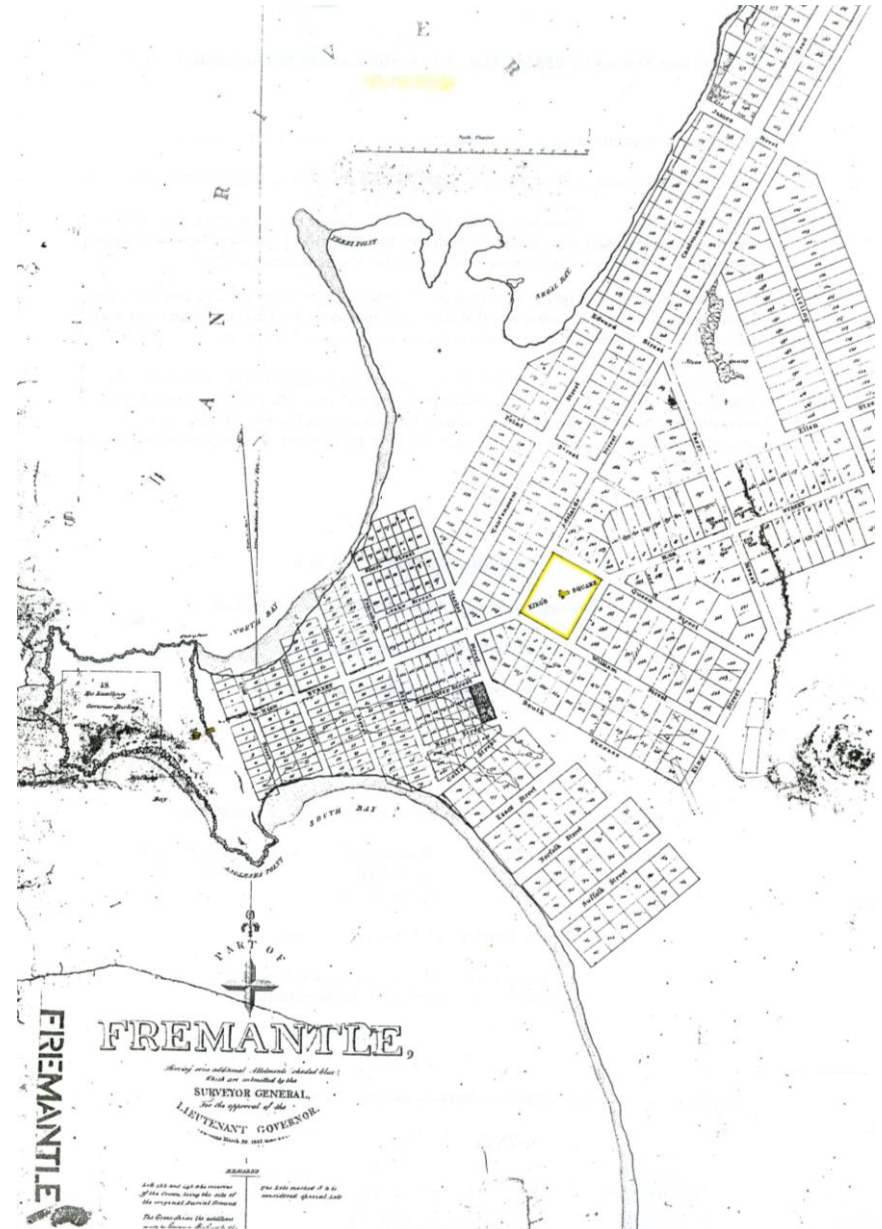
The best of these squares are usually simple, uncluttered spaces capable of being used for a variety of social and cultural functions.

They are mostly edged with interesting, low-scaled, engaging buildings and at footpath level people sit in busy cafes. It is the pleasant memories of these types of places which will draw us back time and time again.



Fremantle's central square

Kings Square, as so clearly shown in the original plans of the city, was intended to be such a place however years of unfortunate decisions have compromised its ability to fulfil its intended role.



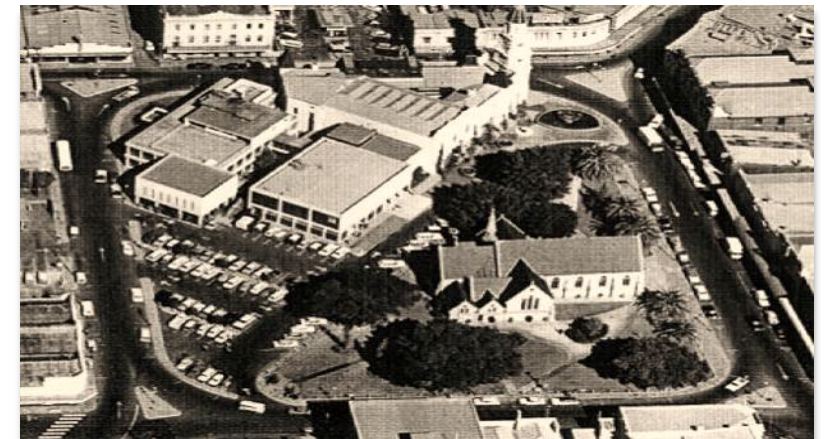
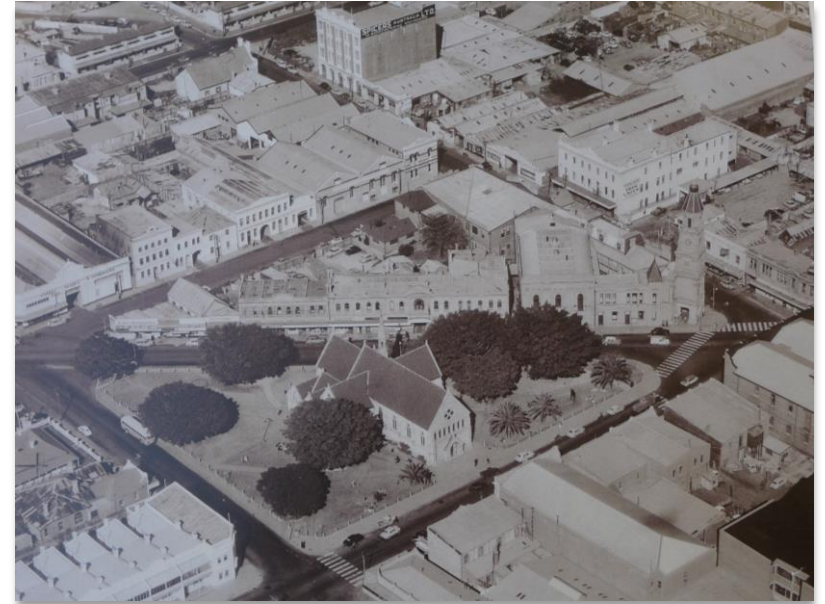
Loss of the original concept

Building a church in the square, while providing a spiritual centrepiece, consumed much of the site.

Then, when High Street was carried through the square became an awkward pair of triangles.

Years later, the City of Fremantle closed off High Street, converted almost half the square into a large car park and grafted their new insensitive City Administration Building onto the heritage-rich town hall.

Destruction of the symbolic, cultural and heritage value of the square was now complete.



Square revitalisation study ignored

Ironically, after all the abuse thrown at the square, in 2006 the City of Fremantle commissioned a professional urban design study to examine its revitalisation prospects.

The study found that the current City Administration Building should be removed.

The recommendation was rejected out-of-hand.

Unlike Fremantle, many cities recognise that investing in the provision of good quality public spaces with inherent civic value is an investment in social capital often outweighing property value.



A grand City Administration Building

Any thought of reinstating Kings Square was then completely abandoned when the City began to work with a developer to turn the Myer and the city-owned Queensgate Buildings into offices and build a new larger City Administration Building spreading even further across Kings Square.

The central belief was that office workers would activate the square and a new Administration Building would attract people.



Creating a people's square

The Fremantle Society believes that revitalisation of Kings Square is critical if Fremantle is to evolve as a complete city and the key to its success lies in removing the current City Administration Building and relocating its function to the Queensgate Building.

City Administration Buildings, unlike town halls, are every-day office buildings and should not be considered as civic icons.

Relocating the Administration Building is not a new proposition however it is an action well within the capacity of the city.



An art gallery and museum

The conversion of the Myers Building into offices may not be able to proceed.

Rather than allowing its massive blank façade to ever dominate the square, the City should consider working with the current or future owners along with suitable curators and exhibitors to transform the building into a combined art gallery, museum and public library.

When properly done, these cultural assets repeatedly draw visitors and residents alike. They usually operate at night which extends the activity in the square well beyond the daylight hours normally associated with office buildings.



Allowing people to live in the square

Residential development also has an important role to play in revitalising the square.

Apartments at upper levels around Kings Square offer the permanent presence public squares need to keep them safe yet it is a concept that the City has steadfastly rejected.

In virtually every central square in European cities, residents in small apartments live overlooking the square.



Kings Square was always intended to be Fremantle's central public place and it is well within the capacity of the city council to return it to its rightful status.

The major challenge for this council will be to change its ethos from being development-oriented to being community and civic-oriented.